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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HAVANA 000168

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DEPT FOR WHA/CCA

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TAGS: CU PGOV PHUM PINR PREL

SUBJECT: CUBAN YOUTH CAUGHT BETWEEN HOPE AND FEAR

Classified By: COM: M.E. Parmly : For reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: In two meetings Cuban youth groups said young people see that they have a historic opportunity to create a change in their country. However, they report widespread fear among the population. They state that Cuban youth want change but are unclear as to what exactly these changes would entail. After the government has subjected them to intense indoctrination for years, the young people have only a vaguest ideas about how the various forms of democratic government work and how market economies function. The idea that unites most of Cuban youth is the desire to be able to make choices. Youth report massive and increasing police harassment of Cuban youth, whether political involved or not. There are significant differences in opinion on how strong the opposition is based on whether the young people are affiliated or not with specific opposition groups. Youth groups report that their biggest problem is the ability to distribute information. Many of the young people do not support the US embargo, but this policy does have some strong defenders. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Pol off held a meeting of young people at his house on XXXXXXXXXXXX attended by 29 people, mostly between the ages of 17 and 25 with a few older members of some organizations. Some belonged to civil society organizations but several were not members of any specific organization. On XXXXXXXXXXXX hosted at his residence a group of 19 members of XXXXXXXXXXXX This group included several active university students. It is especially notable that XXXXXXXXXXXX has more success engaging in dialogue university students from the eastern part of the country than from any other region. XXXXXXXXXXXX has recently gathered more than 5000 signatures to demand autonomy in the higher educational system and the reopening of the Villanueva Catholic University. The students stated that their interest was not specifically for the restoration of Catholic education but rather for a return to Cuba's rich cultural tradition of private universities.

¶3. (C) Both groups discussed a recent incident where a student at a College of Computer Science sharply questioned Ricardo De Alarcon, President of the Cuban National Assembly. Some members of XXXXXXXXXXXX expressed that this episode indicates that students were more willing to speak up. On the other hand, everyone of the other group of 29 young people thought that this was a staged incident put on by some members of the government to embarrass Alarcon. No one in

this group could answer why the government would want to publicize the very issues that the group had already listed as the things that most anger ordinary Cubans, namely, the lack of basic goods and the preferential treatment given to foreigners. However, this consideration did not dissuade any of the young people from their conspiracy theories.

14. (C) Another split between the groups was that the XXXXXXXXXXXX students represent that practically no one in Cuba supports the government, while the unaffiliated youth maintain that many people support the regime, beginning with their own parents. This group stated that the government operates a very effective propaganda apparatus and many people simply have no other source of information. One person described the process of disenchantment with the government as "the slow lifting of a veil." All of the youth believed that they had a historic opportunity to institute change because of the passing of authority from Fidel Castro and due to what they perceive as confusion within the government. However, the group at the meeting of XXXXXXXXXXXX told Pol off that Cuban young people in general don't have a clear picture of what a change would mean. They said that they have only the most rudimentary idea of how various democratic governments are structured and how market economies work. They said that even above all Cuban youth want choice and the ability to end government control over every aspect of their lives.

15. (C) Many of those present expressed that young people are the number one target of increased repression by police and state security officials. They said that youth are harassed for a whole host of reasons, most of them unrelated to

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politics. They said young adults are constantly stopped in the streets and when their ID card shows an address other than Havana, they are forcibly shipped back to their hometowns with a warning never to return. Several black youths stated that there are many neighborhoods where the police practice racial profiling and threaten with arrest any Afro Cuban youth hanging out in the street. XXXXXXXXXXXX aid that they recorded during 2007 in Havana 3000 incidents of young homosexuals fined or detained for simply congregating in the street and 12 cases of young homosexuals sentenced to prison for two to four years under the law of "dangerousness" simply because they returned to a park that they were told to stay away from. Nearly everyone in the room had a story about being threatened recently by the police. The group said police harassment occurs at all times of the day in every part of the country.

16. (C) The XXXXXXXXXXXX did feel that despite a lot of fear there is potential for a large scale student movement in favor of autonomy for the universities and academic freedom. The other group stated because of fear of expulsion, and the present of a large number of willing government collaborators, the universities were the last place to expect the emergence of a large scale, activist youth movement. XXXXXXXXXXXX, expelled from university for refusing to participate in a demonstration against a dissident, said that despite many problems with poor physical facilities and bad food, conditions at the universities have improved recently due to large scale Venezuelan investment. Many of the unaffiliated youths stated that the potential for explosion is in the high schools, where senior students not placed on a university track see themselves with little to lose. Citing an incident on February 1 where a 17 year old novice teacher threw a chair and killed a 12 year old, members of this group told numerous stories of the lack of teachers and the assignment of young, barely trained teachers, with neither the knowledge nor temperament for dealing with students, who are close enough in age to be their peers. They said that there are numerous instances of physical abuse of students, pedophilia, sexual harassment, and solicitations of bribes to change grades. In many instances teachers play an educational program on television for the classes and do not attempt otherwise to instruct the students. XXXXXXXXXXXX I stated that she goes to many schools where the walls are

crumbling, the building is infested with insects, the furniture is broken and there is no food to feed the children. Many of the youths stated that parents are very frustrated with the lack of response from the school authorities. As part of the "lifting of the veil" phenomenon, many parents are now questioning the value of much of the education system such as mandatory participation in "patriotic" activities and military training over the weekends and forced labor picking coffee or fruit in the countryside for a month and a half during the school year.

¶7. (C) Youth groups agree that their biggest problem is getting out information which is now largely word-of-mouth. There were several complaints that the outlets devoted to Cuba news are nearly completely focused on the traditional dissident movements. Many participants in the meetings expressed admiration for several long standing opposition leaders but clearly said that neither they nor the Cuban exile community represent the thoughts of Cuban youth.

¶8. (C) On 13 February there was a vigorous discussion of the US embargo. The vast majority thought that the embargo was a bad idea. Many had stories about how meetings with actual Americans had positively changed their opinions about the US. Several thought that the ending of the embargo would mean that the GOC could not continue to blame all of the problems with the economy on the embargo. Five others vigorously defended the embargo stating that the lifting of it would be a huge propaganda victory that the GOC did not earn by any action.

¶9. (C) Comment: Cuban youth is probably the most difficult group for XXXXXXXXXXXX to contact because of a high level of fear. It is plain from the sheer number of repressive incidents reported that this is the group that the government fears the most and subjects to the most harassment

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.There are differences in the opinions of youth about the possibility of change based on geography and whether the youths are affiliated with opposition groups. By and large young people do not know what type of change they are looking for. Their common desire is for choice, and a release from the control of the government over every aspect of their lives. XXXXXXXXXXXX continues to work to expand contact with youths at every level of Cuban society.

PARMLY